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ABSTRACT

The ability of debate coaches and instructors to define the goals of their activity is essential to any meaningful evaluation of success in achieving those goals. Much of the criticism of debate rests on the faulty assumption that coaches and instructors agree as to what they are trying to teach students. Numerous writers have addressed the question of the goals of debate, often describing what debate should and does teach the student, and providing a variety of benefits of debate that could easily be framed as goals. While no two lists would be identical, an extensive sampling of the literature reveals several recurring themes. The first, and most frequently cited, is the enhancement of critical thinking and reasoning abilities. The second could be classified under the general rubric of academic advancement or development. A third and final goal would be to promote communication skills. Most programs are, in all likelihood, promoting these goals and the most serious dispute will probably be in setting priorities. Other goals would be valuable to a high school program as well. One is providing students with elevated challenges, another is providing them with exceptional experiences, and a third is providing students with training advantages for their future endeavors. There are any number of extremely significant values and benefits associated with debate, and these should form the basis of debate instructors' goals for future debaters. (HTH)

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What Should be the Goals of High School Debate?

Blair Lybbert

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CS 505 328

What Should be the Goals of High School Debate?

by

Blair Lybbert

The National Forensic League is to be commended for its role in attempting to reconcile the many divergent opinions concerning the "State of High School Debate." It is a privilege to participate in this conference with so many distinguished Forensic educators. Nevertheless, participation and discussion are not enough - we must seek some consensus concerning the many troubling issues confronting interscholastic debate.

It is appropriate, then, that we begin by posing the question; What should be the goals of high school debate? Initially, the question seems to be relatively uncontroversial. And yet, our ability to define the goals of our activity is essential to any meaningful evaluation of our success in achieving those goals. Moreover, much of the criticism of debate rests on the faulty assumption that we agree as to what we are trying to teach our students. The recurring conflict over speaking style versus content provides an excellent illustration of why we must find common ground in delineating the goals of debate. The critics of contemporary debate practices frequently assume that persuasion and speaking style are the primary objectives of the activity. A debater who talks fast is, then, ample evidence of the failure of debate to satisfy its goal. The fact that style is a lesser priority with other participants is often lost on the critic. In point of fact, a national survey by W.B. Pearce of the members of the American Forensic Association ranked ability in public speaking as the least important objective of debate, viewing as more desirable the development of research skills and rational decision making.[1] Although the survey centered on college debate, we can, at least, assume that there is something less than universal support for the primacy of speaking ability as the goal of high school debate. So, we might

be wise to take heed of Brant R. Burleson's reminder that: "it is unfair to criticize a method for being inapplicable to phenomena it makes no pretension of accommodating."[2] Thus, our ability to define and agree on goals and objectives may well facilitate an effective answer to our critics.

What, then, should be the goals of high school debate? Obviously, it would be presumptious for this speaker, or any individual, to claim to have a definitive answer. Instead, we might begin by considering what has been written by our colleagues. Additionally, I will offer some of the goals I have developed that seem to have served the needs of the students I have been privileged to work with in my 14 years as a coach. Perhaps this analysis will provide us with a starting point for discussion.

Numerous writers have addressed the question of the goals of debate, often describing what debate should and does teach the student. Goals are frequently listed as program characteristics, benefits or values. Indeed, most debate textbooks contain a perfunctory chapter or section on educational goals and values. For example, in their text Directing Forensics: Debate and Contest Speaking, Faules and Rieke specify eight desirable goals, including; (1) clear and rational thinking, (2) ability to utilize effectively the library and other research facilities, (3) capacity to engage in intensive intellectual activity, (4) ability to avoid uncritical acceptance of ideas, (5) social adjustment, (6) commitment to ethical behavior, (7) effective use of language whether written or oral, (8) ability to organize and synthesize diverse bits of information into a meaningful whole..."[3] Patterson and Zarefsky, in their text Contemporary Debate, note several benefits of studying argumentation, including; (1) critical thinking, (2) systematic investigation, (3) communication skills, (4) critical choices, (5) improving values, and (6) testing ideas.[4] Other writers have, in addition, focused on the intra and interpersonal benefits of debate. Among the qualities encouraged by debate,

Austin Freeley lists sincerity, honesty, courage, and social maturity.[5] Richard Cartell claims, "...that the student begins to develop confidence in his abilities which can have a positive effect upon that person's perception of himself."[6]

It should be apparent that a wide range of writers have provided us with a variety of benefits of debate that could easily be framed as goals. While no two lists, of course, would be identical, an extensive sampling of the literature reveals several recurring themes. These ideas appear both popular enough and desirable for us to consider them as goals to be sought.

The first, and most frequently cited is the enhancement of critical thinking and reasoning abilities. Indeed, a veritable litany of research on critical thinking and debate can be traced back to the 1940s.[7] A second basic goal of debate could be classified under the general rubric of academic advancement or development. This might include a number of advantages such as knowledge acquisition in the topic areas, research and information processing skills, and academic rigor. A third, and final, goal would be to promote communication skills. These objectives would seem to provide high school debate programs with a positive direction. Most programs are, in all likihood, promoting these goals and the most serious dispute will probably be in their prioritization. And while many coaches would decry relegating speaking skills to a lesser priority, such a ranking appears representative of the activity. Moreover, debate alone nurtures such extensive critical thinking and academic gains, whereas several forensic events promote speaking skills for the high school participant.

Many other goals could be supported. As already noted, some writers have mentioned the social aspects of debate and the debate program. Several commentators have argued that a goal of debate should be to develop rational

advocates in order to enhance democratic ideals or the political process. Each of these suggestions has merit.

Lastly, I would like to add to the discussion some of the goals I have found to be valuable in my own high school program. Much of what has been written about debate either focuses on college debate or fails to distinguish between college and high school debate. Since our emphasis is necessarily on high school debate and less seems to have been published about the acitivity at that level, we may find anecdotal data particularly useful.

My own goals would include those three broad categories already discussed, and, in the same order of importance. Unfortunately, to acclaim critical thinking and the academic virtues of debate ahead of communication values is to be at odds with many of my colleagues. However, to value the one goal is not to dismiss the other. J. Robert Cox studied the judging philosophies of numerous college coaches and found that speaking skills were viewed as a lesser priority in debate. And yet, while Cox found that judge after judge commented that fast, or spread, rounds were acceptable, and even enjoyable, these same judges decried the unclear, incomprehensible, or nonsubstantive use of the style. Cox concluded that "...when the use of the spread leads to analytical and/or communicative abuses judges universally condemn the techniques."[8] Perhaps we can agree that speaking skills are an important goal, but they are not the only goal or even the most critical one.

Beyond these generally acknowledged objectives of debate, I find the high school program offers unique opportunities to the student participant. One goal that brings particular satisfaction is that of providing high school students with elevated challenges. Long before A Nation at Risk bemoaned the quality of public education in America, most of our students could have offered eloquent testimony about the mediocrity we so often find in the schools. For many of the bright young people that populate our squads, debate has been the first real challenge of their

intellects and abilities. They become motivated by the task and develop a genuine appreciation for the process of learning.

Another goal I find particularly relevant to high school students is providing them with exceptional experiences. Much of what we do is not typically available to students in any other curricular offering of the school. For instance, the opportunity to meet and interact with students from different regions of the country. These associations are especially meaningful to students from limited backgrounds or homogeneous communities. Traveling to different parts of a state or the country can also provide the student with an expanded understanding of the world around him. This goal can be enhanced by including in the travel itinerary those educational or historical points of interest at the site to be visited. We can all attest to the social development and maturation we have seen in our students that is linked directly to the debate experience.

A final objective we should seek is to provide our students with the training advantages debate can provide for the student in his future endeavors. Even before the debater leaves high school he will find he is becoming a more able student. John T. Rickey claims "debaters often improve grades in other subjects. They seem to be able to organize their thoughts on essay tests. They can weigh alternatives on multiple choice tests. They can do research for term papers and research projects."[9] In college, the debate experience translates into a better prepared student. Debate contributes to other future pursuits as well. We have all seen the relationship between debate training and law or teaching. Additionally, it seems reasonable that most former debaters find their training important in later professional interests. Indeed, a survey was conducted by the Freedom and Union magazine, which polled various successful leaders in politics, business, and other professions to determine the influence of debate. The results indicated: "100 of the 160 respondents had debated, and 90 of the 100 believed that debate experience had been extremely

valuable in their careers."[10] And Robert O. Weiss conducted a survey in which he found that the legal and educational professions accounted for more former debaters than all other fields combined, with law slightly ahead of education. He notes: "The most striking conclusion emerging from the tabulation of these occupational designations is that more than one-half of the award winning debaters have become either lawyers or teachers."[11] If our goal is to provide our students with the skills and confidence to undertake higher academic challenges, we seem to be achieving it successfully.

There are any number of extremely significant values and benefits associated with debate. These should form the basis of our goals for future debaters. Those of us who remain committed to the activity welcome this conference. Hopefully, we can begin by finding some common ground as we try to answer the question of what should be the goals of high school debate.

Notes

[1]W. Barnett Pearce, "Attitudes Toward Forensics," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 10 (1974), 137.

[2]Brant R. Burleson, "On the Analysis and Criticism of Arguments: Some Theoretical and Methodological Considerations," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 15 (1974), 157-58.

[3]Don F. Faules and Richard D. Ricke, Directing Forensics: Debate and Contest Speaking (Scranton: International Textbook Co., 1968), p. 55-56.

[4]J.W. Patterson and David Zarefsky, Contemporary Debate (Dallas: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1983), p. 313-315.

[5]Austin J. Freeley, Argumentation and Debate (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1971), p.24-25

[6]Richard Gartell, "Educational Forensics: Another Viewpoint," The Forensic, 58 (1973), 3.

[7]William S. Howell, "The Effects of High School Debating on Critical Thinking," Speech Monographs, 10 (1943), 97; Winston L. Bembeck, "The Effects of a Course in Argumentation on Critical Thinking Ability," Speech Monographs, 16 (1949), 177-189; Ellwood R. Tame, Ted R. Jackson both cited in "Critical Thinking, Reflective Thinking, and the Ability to Organize Ideas: A Multi-Variate Approach," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 9 (1972), 262; Charles R. Gruner, Richard C. Huseman, and James I. Luck, "Debating Ability, Critical Thinking, and Authoritarianism," Speaker and Gavel, 8 (1971), 63-64; D.P. Cushman and John W. Todd, "Critical Thinking and Communication Skills," Debate Issues, 6 (1973), 8-14.

[8]J. Robert Cox, "A Study of Judging Philosophies," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 11 (1974), 70.

[9]John T. Rickey, "The Value of Debate," Debate Issues, 2 (1978), 3.

[10]Donald W. Klopf and Carroll P. Lahmann, Coaching and Directing Forensics (Skokie: National Textbook Co., 1967), p. 6.

[11]Robert O. Weiss, "College Debate and Vocational Choice," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 9 (1973), 466.